

Establishing a Community Wildlife Sanctuary in the Mbe Mountains: boundary demarcation of a core conservation area

A progress report to the Kolmarden Fundraising Foundation from the Wildlife Conservation Society

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Introduction

The rainforests of south-east Nigeria are recognized as a biodiversity hotspot of global importance with especially high primate richness and endemism including the critically endangered Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*). As a result of rapid population growth and escalating levels of poverty the forests of the region are under pressure from expanding agricultural practices, timber extraction and unsustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products. As a result of hunting and habitat loss, populations of larger mammals have been depleted to critical levels. With fewer than 300 Cross River gorillas remaining a conservation action plan was published in 2007 by IUCN/SSC with support from WCS and others: <http://www.primatesg.org/PDF/CRG.Action.Plan.pdf>.

Covering an area of about eighty square kilometers the Mbe Mountains is one of three sites in Nigeria where gorillas are known to occur, located midway between the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary to the west and Cross River National Park (Okwangwo Division) to the east. Until recently, the Mbe Mountains remained without any formal protected area status at all despite its recognition as an important area for biodiversity conservation. Attempts made in the 1990s to annex the area as part of Cross River National Park were resisted by surrounding communities.

In 2005 representatives from the nine communities surrounding Mbe met and decided that the Mbe Mountains should be set aside as a protected area for conservation and development, and that the area should be managed by themselves as a community wildlife sanctuary. Following a long participatory stakeholder process the *Conservation Association of the Mbe Mountains* (CAMM) was established in 2006 comprising of a General Assembly, Board of Trustees, Management Committee and a Technical and Stakeholders Supervisory Group.

Since 2006 Mbe Mountains has been managed as a community wildlife sanctuary by CAMM with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and a local NGO known as Development in Nigeria (DIN). Funds to support Mbe have been provided by a variety of organizations including the Great Ape Conservation Fund of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Great Ape Trust of Iowa, the Kolmarden Fundraising Foundation, the Margot Marsh Biodiversity Foundation, North Carolina Zoo, Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe and the Ecosystem Grants Programme of IUCN-Netherlands. Although protection efforts in the Mbe Mountains have successfully reduced poaching in the area, the lack of a clear boundary on the ground posed a major challenge to law enforcement.

In 2006 CAMM and its partner organizations agreed to demarcate a boundary for the conservation area. Working with the nine surrounding communities and the Cross River State Forestry Commission (the government institution in charge of

all forests and wildlife within Cross River State), WCS helped to demarcate a provisional boundary - a map of this provisional boundary was subsequently signed by the traditional rulers of all nine communities in 2007. The boundary included two critical corridor areas linking Mbe to Cross River National Park and to the Afi River Forest Reserve. Unfortunately the *permanent* demarcation of this boundary was delayed owing to lack of funds.

In March 2008, WCS received a grant of \$11,000 from the Kolmarden Fundraising Foundation to complete the permanent demarcation of the boundary. Additional funds were also received in 2008 from the Ecosystem Grant Programme of IUCN-NL through a grant to DIN. All vegetation along the boundary has been cleared to a width of three metres and the process is now almost complete. In the coming months the boundary will be planted with seedlings of bush mango and a number of concrete boundary beacons will be erected at strategic locations. Once the boundary is endorsed by Cross River State Forestry Commission it will have full legal status. This will eliminate the difficulty currently faced by ecoguards when dealing with offenders who feign ignorance of the boundary between the community use area and the sanctuary as an excuse to carry out illegal activities in the area.

The demarcation process

In May 2005, twenty-seven community delegates from the nine surrounding communities of the Mbe Mountains convened to discuss the conservation of the Mbe Mountains. At the end of the two-day forum, it was agreed among other things:

- That the Mbe Mountains should be formally established as a community-managed wildlife sanctuary.
- That a conservation area should be delineated in the Mbe Mountains as agreed upon by all nine communities and partner organizations.

Following these decisions a team comprised of staff of WCS and DIN held further consultations with the nine Mbe communities to negotiate a boundary for the Mbe Mountains conservation area based on community interests and existing knowledge of the biological value of different areas of the mountain. The discussions focused on the following issues:

- Perspectives from the local community surrounding the justification for demarcation and their expectations and involvement in the exercise.
- To define the demarcation process

Boundary verification survey

Following from these consultations, each community nominated a representative to work with the technical team drawn from WCS, DIN and the Cross River State Forestry Commission to demarcate the conservation area. It was agreed by the communities and the technical team that a reconnaissance of the area should be carried out to produce a map of the proposed boundary which, if subsequently endorsed by the nine communities, would lead to the demarcation of a permanent boundary. It was agreed that each community representative would lead the demarcation team in identifying the boundary in their section of the forest as agreed by each community. Prior to the reconnaissance survey, a workshop was held in Abo Mkpang to develop a protocol and to ensure that all team members fully understood the process to allow them to participate fully in the field.

Once a protocol was developed, reconnaissance surveys of the area were carried out in April and July 2006. During the first phase in April 2006, a team of twelve persons surveyed the area from Abo Mkpang moving west through Abo Ogbagante, Kanyang 1, Kanyang 2, Wula 1, Wula 2, and Bokalum to Bamba. Individual community representatives led the identification of the boundary in their community's forest as directed by their communities. Where possible, a trail was cut along the boundary and GPS locations recorded at intervals. A GPS track of the boundary and coordinates of all important topographical features encountered were recorded. Flagging tape was tied to trees or branches to mark the boundary. The survey was temporarily stopped to allow further boundary negotiations with some communities based on observations in the field. The break also afforded two of the communities (Abo Mkpang and Abo Obisu) to resolve a land ownership dispute. The survey resumed in July 2006 continuing from Bamba southwest to Abo Mkpang following the bank of the Okon River.

Production and signing of a provisional boundary map

The boundary verification complete, the team reported observations made during the survey to the communities and discussed the next steps. A map of the proposed conservation area was produced based on GPS coordinates collected. In late 2006 a meeting of the chiefs of the nine communities called for the adoption of a provisional boundary. Eight of the nine communities approved the map. Bamba objected to the boundary starting from the Okon River in the east, insisting that the strip of low lying forest about 300 m from the Okon should be excluded from the conservation area and left as a community use zone. This was unacceptable because this forest serves as an important corridor linking the Mbe Mountains and the Okwangwo Division of Cross River National Park. A separate meeting was held with Bamba in early 2007 during which the community agreed to the provisional boundary (with the eastern boundary located at the Okon River) and signed the map.

Demarcation of a permanent boundary

The signing of the map gave approval for the demarcation of a permanent boundary of the conservation area. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds this next phase of the process was delayed till October 2008 when WCS received grants from the Kolmarden Fundraising Foundation and from IUCN-NL (through DIN) to complete the process. With funds available, WCS led consultations with the communities to decide a procedure for permanent demarcation and to encourage community cooperation and participation. Two persons each were hired from the nine communities as labour to clear vegetation along a three-meter wide trail around the conservation area. The team was divided into three sub-teams and deployed to different sections of the boundary to enhance effectiveness. Each team was supervised by a team leader who led the team through the forest navigating with the help of the provisional boundary map, compass and GPS. A GPS tracklog and waypoints of the entire boundary was recorded. In addition to cutting all vegetation along the boundary, the boundary was marked with flagging tape tied to trees for easy recognition.

Community disagreement over the boundary and benefit sharing

Mid way through the permanent demarcation phase the process was disrupted by the decision of two of the nine communities (Kanyang I and Kanyang II) to withdraw their representatives from the demarcation team. Kanyang insisted that all other communities, particularly Abo Mkpang and Bamba, should provide comparable areas of land to the conservation area or recognize the fact that Kanyang deserve a greater share of any benefits that accrue to the communities from the conservation of the Mbe Mountains. To press home their position, the two Kanyang communities jointly issued a letter of withdrawal from CAMM until the issues raised were addressed. The letter stated among other things that:

1. All activities in the Kanyang area of the Mbe Mountains (research, protection and boundary demarcation) should stop immediately.
2. If benefits are to be shared equally as proposed, then each of the other seven communities should also provide equal portions of land to the conservation area as Kanyang I and II (i.e. that the distance from each community to the boundary of the conservation area should be the same).

To avoid further delay to the demarcation process, WCS and DIN held discussions with the Kanyang communities in an attempt to resolve the issue. After a series of meetings, the communities finally agreed that the boundary demarcation should be continued. Once the boundary has been completed the nine communities would meet to resolve the disagreement based on the final

map that is produced. The boundary clearing was thus allowed to continue and was finally completed in April (see map).

Next phase

With the clearing of the boundary now complete plans are underway to plant the boundary with concrete beacons and bush mango trees (*Irvingia* spp). Seedlings are being sourced and will be planted this rainy season.

A post-demarcation meeting with all nine communities and the leadership of CAMM will be held to report on the demarcation exercise and to secure their endorsement of the final output.

With a permanent boundary completed and endorsed by all stakeholders the legal gazettelement of a core conservation area in the Mbe Mountains is expected to be achieved soon. This will certainly improve the long-term protection of the gorillas in the Mbe Mountains.

Appendix (Photos)